



A COMPREHENSIVE STUDY ON WORKING JOURNALISTS IN MANIPUR, INDIA

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ABSTRACT

This article meticulously analyzes the status of working Journalists in Manipur. Manipur, however small it is, is the home of more than 33 listed scheduled tribes apart from the Meities, Meitei Pangals and 7 scheduled castes. Each community has distinct identity, dialect and culture for which everyone is struggling for due recognition of its identity within this tiny state. Reported cases of violations of human rights such as extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearance, torture and threats have become a part of daily news in Manipur. People of Manipur are the victim of parallel government.

This study is founded on primary and secondary data, with the primary data being collected through interviews.

KEYWORDS: Democracy, Press, Journalist and Media

INTRODUCTION

Manipur is a part of India which is the largest democratic country in the world where the role of media is unquestionable and indispensable. Media is the mouthpiece and the backbone of a democratic society (Google Sites, 2016). While media are the protectors of the values of the citizens in a democratic country, it serves as a watchdog of the government. Media plays a very significant role in shaping and preserving a healthy democracy by taking the role of a facilitator of dissemination of information and bridge between government and its citizens (Author, 2015a).

It makes possible for the citizens to enjoy active participation in the process of governance without which there is no sense of democracy. It provides a common platform that everyone can have an easy access for sharing views, thoughts and suggestions. The functions of media are not limited only to the dissemination of news and events but it also shapes public opinion which is of vital importance for good government (Author, 2015a). It is through media that people can be aware of various economical, political and social activities happening around the world. In modern society, democracy and media cannot be apart. As a matter of fact, the press is the vox populi or voice of the people in any country. So, media is rightly considered as the ‘medium for social change’ and first and foremost British Member of Parliament Lord Macaulay had given status - the fourth pillar of the state to the media (Google Sites, 2016). Today, media received the status of Fourth Estate.

The goal of democracy cannot be achieved as long as the media works under the clouds of fear and inhibition. In a democratic society media need to operate with courage and purpose to preserve a healthy democracy. Media must be made a powerful platform to share and to be shared. Journalists are the soul of the print media. So, where there is no freedom for journalists to

report or present the stories without fear and biases, there will be no healthy democracy. Manipur, one of the bordered States of North East India, is bordered by Nagaland to the north, Assam to the west, and Mizoram to the southwest and by Myanmar to the south and east. Imphal is the capital of Manipur. The name Manipur means “land of gems” (Manipur State, 2015). As Manipur is isolated from the rest of India, the State’s economy is mostly based on agriculture and forestry, and medium and small industries including cottage industries where handloom and handicrafts also take are vital role (Indian Brand Equity Foundation, 2016). Manipur became a full-fledged state in 1972 (Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, 2016). The state language ‘Manipuri’ was officially recognized as a national language under Eight Schedule of the Indian Constitution in 1992 (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2016). The geographical area of Manipur is 22,327 Sq. Km.; the population of Manipur is 2,721,756 with 79.85 percent literacy rate (Registrar General & Census Commission, 2016).

RESEARCH QUESTION

The primary objective of this study is to examine the status of working journalists in Manipur.

The research question is:

RQ: What are the main challenges faced by journalists in Manipur?

METHODOLOGY

This research study is based on both primary and secondary data. For the collection of primary data, interview methods are used. The interview of the President of All Manipur Working Journalists' Union (AMWJU) which is an umbrella of journalists in Manipur, the Secretary of Manipur Press Club, Imphal, is conducted for the collection data related to study area. They are Chief Editor of Kangleipak Meira

(popular local newspaper) and senior journalist (the Times of India) respectively. For this study, Researchers also analyzed the news of unwanted accidents happening to journalists that were being published in two popular local newspapers during the last 10 months starting from July 2015 to last April 2016. The selected local newspapers are The Sangai Express which is the most popular news agency of Manipur. The Sangai Express is the largest circulated Daily in Manipur. The Sangai Express publishes news of Manipur in English and Manipuri languages. It is available both in print and E-Paper format. The other one is the Imphal Free Press which is one of the leading newspapers in Manipur published daily in English. It is also available in E-Paper format.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Now-a-days, a good number of media houses sprung up in the last two decades.

However, the working condition of the media persons in Manipur is still in poor condition. They are not getting what they deserve. They are working against the clock right from dawn to late at night. On the contrary, the starting salary of the journalists is quite less and the pay remains basic even after many years. They are not properly facilitated with timely increments and other benefits (Souvenir XXXIX, 2014). Wangkhemcha Shamjai, (Interview with Authors, 2016) expressed "From 1997, the government of Manipur introduced a pension scheme of the journalists in collaboration with the All Manipur Working Journalists Union (AMWJU) entitled 'Manipur Working Journalists Pension Scheme'. Under this scheme, as of date, six journalists and five widows of journalists are being provided with a meager monthly pension of Rs.4000 and Rs.2000 respectively".

In Manipur, the freedom of press is persistently attacked. The journalists are working under the cloud of fear and pressure. They are continuously being oppressed and pressured. They are victims of conflicts between the state and non-state actors. Undoubtedly, both Indian armed forces and armed opposition groups pressure and threaten journalists to become their mouthpieces. There are many instances of limitations of freedom of press in the state. Under the shadow of AFSPA, 1958, the journalists are frequently attacked, with frequent arrests, harassment, physical abuse and obstruction of work.

Proscribed insurgent groups which are operating in the state earlier relied on Pamphlets and word-of-mouth to spread their ideas and propagandas are now turning into newspapers and news channel to use them as powerful tool of airing their ideas and statements (Souvenir XXXIX, 2014). Similar is the case with the state forces. Media persons are forced to attend the danger areas at their own risks such as press briefing, displaying of captured arms during the operations and surrender ceremonies. In this tiresome armed-conflict between the insurgent groups and state forces, innocent civilians and media persons are the ultimate victims (Souvenir XXXIX, 2014). This dirty war of propagandas has led to the frequent harassment of media persons, in the form of killings, bombings, life attempts, assault and arrests (Souvenir XXXIX, 2014).

Since 1993 till now seven journalists have been killed in Manipur. Frequent incidents of life attempts, assault and bombings are uncountable. It is not exaggerated to say that almost every day there is always threat or pressure from underground militants over phone (Souvenir XXXIX, 2014). Wangkhemcha Shamjai expressed his dissatisfaction that "In most cases, media persons respond with dharnas, suspension of publication, blank editorials, rallies and demand to the government for safe atmosphere to work in. But the working condition remains the same as most of the underground militants believe that it is necessary to pressurize the media persons to carry their press release in the way that they want it to be, or in other words, without editing their texts."

Alarmingly, in Manipur, the cases of human rights violations have become a daily news item on regular basis in which Indian armed forces are also involved. Under the shadow of Armed Force Special Powers Act 1958 (infamously known as AFSPA, or the draconian law, or the black law, or the license to kill, as the people say), the rights of the citizens are deliberately violated. As a result, the cases of alleged extra-judicial killings such as fake encounter killings are on rise becoming burning issue of human right violations in the present scenario of Manipur.

In this armed-conflict situation, the role of journalists in narrating the real picture to mass is not that easy or simple as it seems to be. Perhaps there are seen or unseen forces to let down the strength of the pen. It is easier said than done. The old-saying 'The pen is mightier than the sword' should be read as 'The sword is mightier than the pen', without any hesitation.

As of human rights violations by state armed forces, the Santosh Hedge Commission, which was constituted by the Supreme Court to probe six of the 1528 cases listed in a petition, had concluded that all the six cases involving death of seven persons were all fake encounter killings, says an official report (Supreme Court, 2015).

Besides all the above mentioned cases, the frequent bandhs, strikes and blockades also disturb the atmosphere and normalcy of the State. The survey conducted by Social worker Serto Tondon highlighted that there were 165 days of bandh or general strike in 2014 and there were 80 days of bandh or general strike till October 2015 as per data received from the intelligence wing of Manipur police. And also there were 19 days of economic blockade in 2014 and 24 days of economic blockade till October 2015 (Bandh costs Rs 36 crore, blockade Rs 3.09 crore per day, 2015).

In addition, Manipur is a land locked state in which facilities of transportation and communication are poor. Still there are many parts particularly in remote area which do not have connectivity with the rest. All these deter the functions of the media activities.

Manipur is not only a conflict region where there are more than 40 insurgent groups but also a land of diversity with many different tribes along with their different customs and traditions. K. Sarojkumar Sharma, Manipur Press Club Secretary and

Senior Journalist, The Times of India (Interview with Authors, 2016) opined that “In Manipur, every journalist needs be wise enough for a careful writing in presenting the stories particularly community news. Caution should be taken up not to harm the interest of any community”.

CONCLUSION

Unfortunately, in Manipur the freedom of press is frequently attacked, thereby suppressing the wills of the people. Journalists have been persistently targeted and pressurized to become mouthpieces against their will and ethics, so to say. The cases of harassments and threats to journalists from state and non-state elements have become very common in media houses. Some of the accidents are very poignant. Sadly, some of the journalists have lost their life in this conflict thereby they become the ultimate victims of their profession.

Despite all these hurdles and challenges condition, media community in Manipur has been working with dignity and integrity to preserve its value and its responsibility of being watchdog of the society and government. In Manipur, journalists don't receive reward what they deserve.

Despite this, however, the media community has been united in its stand that the sanctity of the profession must not be compromised.

Finally, the government should try and bring about an amicable settlement to the current insurgency problem in Manipur. This would help alleviate the situation in the state. Until then, the media will continue to be tested. It is quite evident that the freedom of press is extremely limited in Manipur and seemingly other parts of North Eastern Region of India.

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